

COMMENTARY

The youth climate movement: Out of sight, out of mind?

YOUTH ([HTTPS://WWW.EPC.EU/EN/SEARCH?TAG=549](https://www.epc.eu/en/search?tag=549)) / COMMENTARY

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Although the youth climate movement has significantly impacted the EU's climate action in the past years, the ongoing pandemic hinders the young activists' possibilities to raise their concerns via on-the-ground protests. The EU must improve its support for the movement by developing its existing participatory tools further and ensure long-term engagement with young citizens.

The social distancing measures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are forcing young climate activists to pause their street action. Moreover, as the world fixates on managing the health and economic crises, many young people are worried that climate action is being put on the back burner and their voices easily ignored.

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As young people will be most affected by climate change, the EU must better support the youth movement. It should ensure that the movement's demands and needs are

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being heard and incorporated into EU-level discussions in a systematic and institutionally recognised way. Only through decision-makers' cooperation with young people can a sustainable and intergenerationally just future be secured.

Clear demands for urgent action

Climate strikes and protests – ignited in 2018 by the Fridays for Future movement – sent a clear message: the EU and its member states must scale up their climate action efforts. Demands include more ambitious and binding emissions reduction targets, as well as declarations of climate emergency.

Although decision-makers and the media have widely acknowledged these demonstrations and their considerable impact, the official channels and opportunities for youth participation in the EU and member states remain limited (<https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Does-the-EUs-recovery-package-actually-include-the-next-generation~3cc88c>). Many young people (<https://www.sitra.fi/julkaisut/tulevaisuususkohukassa/>) feel that they have the necessary knowledge and capacity to participate in the wider debate on EU climate action but are often belittled or ignored.

Young voices matter

There are various reasons why the future of the EU's climate action should be shaped with its youth. First, youth are agents of change. The youth climate movement has influenced the European Commission and helped place the Green Deal as a key priority in its 2019-24 Political Guidelines.

Second, young people will be the ones most affected by climate change and today's political decisions. Although the effects of the climate crisis are already being recorded, the situation will only worsen. And it is the youth that will hold the biggest burden. The active participation of youth in the EU's future climate action is crucial to ensure that the citizens of the future are well represented in the wider debate.

Third, youth are important allies for ambitious action. Young people have managed to underscore the urgency of the climate situation and the importance of collective action. They have effectively contributed to awareness-raising and the better establishment of certain terms (<https://www.mdpi.com/2071-1050/12/10/4127>), such as 'climate strike' and 'climate emergency'. By answering the calls of the youth and supporting the climate movement, the EU would ensure societal buy-in for its own climate measures and long-term public support.



The EU should better support the youth climate movement.

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In order to better support the youth climate movement and respond to its demands, the

EU should take several steps. Most importantly, the EU must address the discrepancy that continues to exist between rhetoric and action when it comes to its climate policies. Young climate activists are rightly frustrated that the ambition reflected in the goals and speeches of many EU leaders is often not reflected in the actual measures taken. Examples include the ongoing work on the Farm to Fork strategy (<https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/The-Farm-to-Fork-Strategy-and-the-inconvenient-truth~33ac84>) and Common Agricultural Policy reform (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/agriculture-food/news/time-for-small-amendments-to-cap-is-over-greta-tells-the-eu/>), with the latter being the focus of the most recent youth campaigns.

Young people's frustrations with elected representatives stem from their lack of political leverage due to the low level of political youth representation and the age requirements for voting. As such, physical protests are one of their main tools for addressing the climate crisis and demanding a more sustainable Europe. As the COVID-19 crisis has shown how easily climate protests can be unsettled, the EU should invest in identifying and supporting youth participatory tools that are not as easily disrupted.

...and ensure meaningful participation

Some promising initiatives, such as the Young Europe Ambassadors or the Agenda 2030 Youth Group, have already taken place at the member state level. The EU should encourage the development of similar initiatives across all EU member states. It should also ensure that the participatory tools already existing at the EU level can further improve the engagement with young people concerned with the climate crisis. people concerned with the climate crisis.

One such participatory tool is the European Commission's Climate Pact initiative, launched under the European Green Deal in December 2020. It better communicates the EU's green actions and offers younger generations a platform to share climate-friendly practices. Currently focusing on green areas, transport, buildings and skills, the Pact aims to improve citizens' knowledge on the climate crisis and possibilities to scale up action by organising events or becoming Climate Ambassadors. However, to turn it into an effective knowledge-sharing tool for youth, it should be developed further to ensure that it is attractive. For instance, its scope should be broadened to cover topics of concern, such as food policy.

Many young climate activists demand more discussion about future pathways and more forums to have these discussions. The Conference on the Future of Europe (https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/en_-joint_declaration_on_the_conference_on_the_future_of_europe.pdf) offers possibilities "to fight against climate change and emerging environmental challenges" and "intergenerational solidarity" are both on its agenda. Moreover, "[s]pecific events should be dedicated to young people as their participation is essential for ensuring a long-

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lasting impact of the Conference.” In order to continue young people’s meaningful participation in the debate on climate policies and the future of Europe, the three EU institutions should ensure that the follow-up actions to the year-long Conference include a permanent and official space for youth to exercise policy advocacy effectively.

Genuine inclusion

When engaging with young climate activists, tokenism – involving young people superficially when ultimately, they have little to no influence at all – should be avoided at all costs. It poses a danger to Europe’s democracy and participation processes as it implies that young people are not being included in the broader debate on the future of Europe.

The coming years will be decisive for addressing the climate crisis. The EU risks undermining long-term support if it does not attend to the wishes of the youth climate movement. The best way to guarantee responsible policymaking for tomorrow is to include young people in EU decision-making today.

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